

The Purse

Strolling to think, he thought, in Coconut Grove, an arty neighborhood in Miami, Skip heard a groundglass "Get him!" from a wide woman attempting to exit a Cadillac. A burly man had grabbed her purse through the open window and was running.

Skip planted his feet: "I'm on vacation!" But nobody else chased the robber except the victim, she nearly as bulky in a trenchcoat. He trailed behind, hoping some of those at sunny breakfasts outside Angela's Restaurant would join in. Running almost unconsciously, his long strides carried him well past the fat woman. He slowed then, not desirous of catching anyone, but sickened to see the robber trapped in a blind alley behind the Coconut Grove Theater, jerkily revolving to confront Skip amid rocking garbage cans. Skip thudded to a halt just before he felt someone leap onto his back.

"You just hold it, Handsome!" she squealed, as two officers puffed by them, one flashing handcuffs.

"Why hello there, Honeybun!" the other officer shouted to the robber, who closed his eyes thrusting out the purse. It was soon tossed back with a "Here you go, Gretchen!" and the woman dismounted from the amazed Skip to catch it.

"Wouldn't want to lose the famous departmental pocketbook," she winked at Skip as she placed the purse on the asphalt, and removed her trenchcoat.

GRETCHEN WEBBERLY announced the bronze nametag. A muscular, hard-eyed woman in her uniform, she asked, "What do they call you?" flipping open a notebook. The flash of its aluminum cover made Skip jump, and Gretchen smile.

"Skip," he answered and her smile widened.

"Skip. Uh huh. Well, since this is for a police report, we tend to be a bit more formal--even in Coconut Grove. So let's have a last name too, shall we?" Skip moved quite close, almost a reflex when talking to a woman. He bestowed a benign grin on Gretchen Webberly, it fading as her questions went on. "Patrolperson Webberly calling Planet Skip!" she eventually yelled, floating her pen across his gaze like a miniature silver spaceship.

He had forgotten the incident and almost everything else until the the next day's phonecall. "Hello hero!" Gretchen began. When he protested she defined a hero as one who gets a chance to desist and doesn't.

"Well I took a pretty long time."--Skip added to this concept by shrugging with meditative drama, as if she could see him. "Uh, that is I, whatchacallit, desisted. And I was doing some of that when I was running too."

"You're just a thoughtful person then."

"Nobody ever said that before."

"Well I'm sure of it." laughed the officer, who asked additional questions for her report.

During the next phonecall, Skip learned that "We have to do more than just a regular job 'cause this is part of a big national crime survey." Marital status came up.

"Divorce."

After a pause Gretchen whispered, "Was it a sex thing? Don't answer! How completely unprofessional! The most irrational things bite at me sometimes. It's so schoolgirlish!"

"I don't care," Skip shrugged. "Anyways, couldn't be. Anyways it's over. I don't think about it anymore."

"Then it was!"

"No! At least I don't think so. I can't see how."

"Are you uncomfortable with my asking you these things? About sex?"

"I don't think so." He held the phone with his chin and began combing his hair, pondering his image in the gummy glass covering a yachting print above his motel bed.

"Well don't worry..."--a stifled laugh--"there's a cure." Was somebody listening at her end? A woman often phoned him with another listening; with all the giggling it was frequently hard to decipher the words. Often, too, she would call back to apologize...before opening her heart for some reason.

"Say? Why not meet for lunch at Angela's or The Pirate's tomorrow? I mean it's mostly social but you have a need to talk about all of this," Gretchen erupted.

"I do? Oh. Well, yes. Of course. You're the expert on that sort of thing I guess."

"Masters in Criminal Science and Psychology. Your ideas could be important in my doctoral work at University of Miami."

"My ex said I didn't have any."

"Well that wasn't very nice. Sounds like she was making you up for her own sick reasons--excuse my saying so."

"I never thought about it, whether it was or not I mean. Nice I mean. But...she did make me up a lot. She did that a lot," Skip frowned, petulant over one blond wave, borderline

frizzy.

"Whatever. I'll have to come in drag, my macho cop outfit. The department dresses the women as boys but our hips give us away."

Her hips give her away all right, mused Skip on a bench at the Coconut Grove Marina that following day, an hour to kill before meeting Gretchen. He suddenly pictured the thin Betsy, his ex, carrying an armful of her clothes from the apartment just after repeatedly thumping his head while saying "My...Playgirl Bunny! You just stay lovely with nothing really gunking up anything in there. And now when I go out the waitresses and shopgirls will actually start paying some attention to me! Hey, why fight it, Skippy? You make women happy with your simple simple presence. Hey it's not your fault! It's the Sexual Revolution, and we now have the right and obligation and privilege, and especially the burden, to create our own brainless blond dollbabies, anatomically correct, with little penises that just poke out in their innocence."

That kind of talk was the trouble and it started after she took a course at that community college with some feminist bunch. "They used to just have those courses in cooking and shit like that," Skip had pouted to male friends while outlasting a one-sided game on Monday Night Football.

She was making him up all right, just like Gretchen had said.

"In fact they're always making me up!" That's something he resolves to think about right then and there on the bench, by reliving a few samples of the many arguments with women: forever being accused of ideas often triggered by supposed motives of such intricacy that they trapped him, somehow, inside another's overwhelming craziness.

He stares up to the sailboats; a chop in the water makes them roll, their ropes snapping in front of muddy clouds. "I thought I was just being Mr. Nice Guy," he declares. A pale young man inside the marina office proffers a steaming coffee mug in the dark window. With a curt smile Skip mostly ignores him.

"Yeah, they give her away all right," he whispers. Other hips, with a blue and white Igloo cooler, alight from a sailboat. Skip laughs, it being so easy to visualize the flesh under the sweaty shorts--the first easy thing.

Dr! Webberly, Gretchen will become with his help. Oh well, it'll just end up sex on demand again and again. That part was easy, but for some reason they all got restless a few months after, throwing their hair around in all kinds of fits. The frame of Skip's mind expands to accommodate blonds,

brunettes, redheads...a file of young women stretching up the marina boardwalk all the way to the Chart House Restaurant and flopping around in the overcast light like a thousand rag dolls.

He has risen from the bench to maneuver himself into the light flaring through surly clouds, stands in trash from an overflowing barrel, pigeon-toed, a hand thrust down into his crotch: Male Venus in a seashell of styrofoam and foil, bright hair whipping.

In front of him, the girl with the cooler is asking "Yes?" He must've said something she didn't quite hear.

"Got a minute?"-- Skip burns his second-best smile on her. The guy in the office window renews his offer of coffee, vapor curling up from the brilliantly white mug. The girl, reflected, sunny, is pulling up her halter with one hand; now she rests the cooler on the bench in order to tug down on her shorts with the other.

Yet another scene visits Skip: *He* is the robber among battered garbage cans, thrusting forth the purse to a crowd of women tossing their heads helter skelter. Oh why couldn't they just love him for himself? Suddenly the ample Gretchen breasts the wave in the smelly alley. "Just my jumping on your back must have been traumatic. You're not a horse after all!"

"Clothes horse, Betsy, my ex, said, and later...sawhorse."

"That was mean!"--but this from the hazy young woman in front of him. What he uttered to an imaginary Gretchen has made sense to her also. A little smallish but cute, what with her wearing her cap backwards like a baseball catcher, Skip determines...and the type'll believe anything.

Not long after, cardboard gets produced from the cooler. Neither has a pen. "But it's okay!" she giggles. "My work phone is on there. Ask for Marna. It's from a cookie package! I work for the bakery!"

"And I bet you're the sweetest thing there!" How his ex would have been surprised at that quick one! The young man snaps back from the marina office window, a black thread of coffee hanging in the air.

The clouds have lifted and the light dazzles as Skip walks to his lunch date, playing with the nautical cap Marna had placed on his head. "It'll end up bad with this Gretchen police chick, but not be so bad in between," he pronounces, thoughtfully.

Drunks from off a shrimp boat are kicking around a shiny ragball in an impromptu soccer game: "Whatever you say, Captain!" one yells and the others chorus, upsetting Skip's concentration.

He plays with his shrimp cocktail at the Pirate's. They

are hemmed in by tables of various laughs. Cars contend in the nearby street, throwing back harsh sunlight. "It's a cruel world," he informs Gretchen after deeply mulling her remarks concerning this or that study proving something or other. A tear fashions itself in his squinting. "Yeah it's cruel all right, but we got a way of making it nice." She looms, the blinding street behind her. Shimmers from the water glasses and the cutlery roll upward to her shadowed face, her eyes twin pinpoints of ice. A horn blows, Skip shudders.

The Spoon

"Well flip a coin then!" She flung up her hands at his usual caution.

Huh! That's the way you'd do it! But it's a very important business decision, M'am. A subject you flunk most grievously." He shut the drapes against the light off the blue water, his back to her.

As he turned around, she snickered at the drapes, an assortment of sunflowers and dragons. "No," she insisted from the sofa, hugging her knees when he began fiddling with the television console, "I would just, simply, decide."

His tuning grew agitated. "I have seen you decide! Just

grab anything out of the chaos!"

"Nonsense!" she shouted with fiery conviction at his multicolored profile, the wild television picture splashing around the small, darkened apartment. "Oh it's been that way sometimes," she mused. "But at least I don't wait on pins and needles for yet another phonecall."

"Oh yeah? Well just thinking of you making some half-witted guess gives me apoplexy." He was bent over and talking into the TV, where electronic confetti bobbed. "You just leap at things!" He suddenly chuckled in amazement at her, and at the picture which mysteriously snapped in on the huge screen. Squinting, he revolved, basketball players flying behind him.

"You are fifty-five years old!" she informed him, and he stiffened in order to stand as straight as possible.

"Does that mean I have no future?" he pleaded.

"It keeps getting narrower." She squeezed her knees harder and her whole body seemed to diminish on the sofa. "So why flub around when time is so precious?"

He approached in mock fear and flopped beside her, his cream-colored slacks and turtleneck softly immaculate next to her jeans and sweatshirt. "Why are you here?" he asked.

"In the short run I was invited to watch the Boston Celtics on your ridiculous TV. In the long run..." she trailed off.

"It's starting to sound serious," he quipped, intently watching the screen.

But she continued with her original thought. "I wouldn't even know if Harry Bird was playing with a square basketball."

LAR-ry Bird," he exhaled, as if that small mistake could ruin the game--though the last few moments consisted of players speeding to and fro incessantly, and with no points scored.

"Turn it off and let's go out you damn cheapskate! It's the middle of the day. I'm sorry," she told his astonished face, "but I just can't stare at it like you do, comatose. And what's left? Those horrible drapes that you must have gotten on sale like everything else in this suffocating apartment and life." He pressed forward beside her--she thought in reaction to her comment--but someone had almost scored, the ball spinning round and round the hoop before falling into the midst of anxious giants. Even in the muted sound level of the television their grunts and squeaky sneakers were audible. "What, uh, what about the long run?" he inquired absently.

"Well now what about it?" she slapped her knees in exaggerated heartiness.

"They missed again! Oh well. You, you started to say that in the long.... How can you forget things a few seconds past, and yet remember some tiny alleged hurt ten years ago? Is that

female or something?"

She waved off his comments and looked to him with a face so kind he trembled. "In the long run I'm here to bury you."

His eyes widened and he fell so far back into the cushions that she had to twist round to see his face at all. "The few friends and relatives you had you've absolutely alienated. I'm the only one left," she sighed.

"Alienated! For God's sakes," he whispered, "we..."--he brushed lint off his sweater--"s-speak--if it's absolutely necessary."

"They will all flee! Flee when you keel over!"

"Alienated is a strong word," he kept pouting, buried even more in the cushions.

"They're all strong words when you think about them."

Her "insights" always annoyed him who thought that nongeneralization could be applied to life with the least degree of certainty, although something could prove valuable if it made money. "Listen Miss Smart-Ass, I've just been checked by Dr Sam. He took a hundred tests and checked my orifices and..."

"Your precious orifices will last no longer than anybody else's."

"Everything excellent!" he proclaimed while following the parabolic three-point shot of Larry, not Harry, Bird.

She bounded up from the sofa to shut off the console.

"Just when the action is..." he began protesting.

As the picture slowly died behind her she spun round.

"Doc gave me the results before you got them--at the bar of the sailing club."

"How wonderful! One's intimate details discussed over light beer." He was fingering inside his turtleneck.

"You know Dr. Sam for goodness..."

"Yeah I do. He goes from office to hospital to sailing club. Does he even have an apartment? I know he's never been on a boat of any type in his life, let alone sailing..." and he fluttered his hand as if it were an agitated sail.

She shrugged. "So he tells everybody everything. So what? People and their supposed secrets! What a joke!" She was pulling the drapes open, and startling light flooded past her small and somewhat ragged figure.

"Anything else I should know?" he inquired from the sofa.

"Yes. A testicle didn't descend or something?" "I was a little kid!" he sputtered, closing his eyes against the light and against his so-remote past.

"Yeah? Well they're to keep an eye out for something now...men of your age? I think he said something like that anyway--if I didn't read it somewhere."

"What? Look out for? Big C?" he squirmed.

"So say it" she hissed. "Cancer. Say it. Say things."

He didn't say it. "Oh my God!" he said.

"Anyway, not that definite. Besides, that or something has always got to get you in the end--or in the crotch even. Oh now don't put on your prude face. You weren't always so prudish I recall."

She formed his too-familiar words with her mouth as he was saying them. "Never mind all that!" He looked up and caught her. "Now please knock off the clowning and tell me what Dr. Sam said exactly."

"What I told you. Exactly. Vaguely. Whatever. Phone him. Ask him yourself. It's not a confession of weakness to do that. 'Something to look out for.' I think he said. That's all. An afterthought! You're making too much of it--at least I think you are."

"Close the drapes! I can't even see you. You look like some low-budget Hollywood version of a saintly vision. It hurts my eyes. I fervently hope that's not a symptom or something."

She made a large, sweeping gesture to include the brilliant blue water and a few creamy sails just then entering the bay. "That's home. Out there. Where we came from, where we're going."

"God I can't talk to you for ten minutes without the morbid drama coming out."

"How could the truth be morbid?" she snapped. "Truth isn't anything but itself."

"Another of your INsights?" He shifted uncomfortably on the sofa. "Uh, how about putting my beloved Celtics back on? I really have no money to go out. Do you?" He was raising himself just enough to turn a pocket inside out.

"Aw come on! You must have a dollar or two left over from your trip. Come on! We'll get on your beautiful sportcoat--the only thing to my knowledge you didn't buy on sale." She raced to the bedroom and came out with the coat. "Hah hah! I thought so!" and she plucked out a wallet of travelers checks from an inside pocket while waifishly dancing though pools of light on the wooden floor.

"What makes you think they're mine? I have to turn them in to the accountants."

"Who owns the company?" She stopped dancing to point at him. "I shall tell you exactly what to tell the accountants. You needn't improvise. And I will take charge of these." She had fingered inside the slim wallet, having already peeked at the denomination during her dance: five one hundreds she deduced.

"How much is there?"

"A couple of hundred or fifty. Don't worry about it. Since your funeral'll cost you nothing, we'll take out a little at this end."

"Funeral? Funeral? Please stop before you spin yet another fantasy!"

She didn't stop of course. "You'll be alone at one of your selfish little lunches at Angela's or The Pirate and then F00P! your face ends up in the crab casserole!"

"Foop indeed! Why do your fantasies always extract my dignity? And not just your fantasies either."

"They'll call me up. They know me. And I'll tell them *oh it's only a spell. He's had them a dozen times.*"

"I've had no spells. Ever! Zero."

"Get you across the street. I'm little but wiry," she remarked to his incredulous face. "And as to spells I'm talking future tense, five years from now--or beginning tomorrow maybe."

"And then...up to this apartment?"--his question indicating that it was a perfectly good place to live but...

She tried to drag him off the sofa by way of a dress rehearsal. This effort, futile, left her winded. "No, uh, not up to here you absolute lump! Right to...water. Leave you there a minute. *'Now don't go away, y'hear?'* Then up here to fetch hideous drapes. Then go get my sailboat I know the winds and tides."

"Then that's all you know."

"I'll get you to a spot where you'll travel out to sea for sure." "That's enough!" he begged.

"And then," she nodded, her eyes closed, "a few personal words...release dead-you and horror-drapes to God and the wide sea-world and eternity! Eternity!"

"They'll think you murdered me. The authorities will."

"I'll worry about that then."

"Oh that's you all right!" he pronounced.

"So come on! Let's motor! Have some fun. You need a..." and she managed to shove and punch him off the sofa and onto the parquet floor..."push!"

There he sat as she draped the coat over his shoulders, resigned to the punishment she had, and would, inflict, enjoying the game of it too in his ironic way. "It all sounds expensive," he shrugged.

"Leave that to me. I'll forge."

And of course he protested all the way from the boutique (where she bought a simple daytime dress and sensible heels and they stored her jeans and ragged sweat shirt in a WynnDixie bag) to the waiting limo she had arranged that morning, and especially at the Grand Cafe, where she ordered lest he see the

menu.

And onto the pubcrawl all of the bright afternoon.

She lost track of the spending but smiled in the darkening limo coming back, while feeling the irregular ridge, indicating that all the traveller's checks had been ripped out. As they both looked straight ahead she found herself talking quietly and slowly. "We live such deprived lives, you and I. We know all there is to know about each other and that's wonderful, as well as deadly at times...but a letting-go like this every few months or so... hey I need it too! I might go around most of the time looking like Tugboat Annie but..."

He waited for her to finish the thought but she just stared at the blue flow of the early evening traffic.

"I bore you, I know," he whispered. "I bore myself. But I could..." The plush upholstery all but swallowed his soft words.

She took his hand. "Oh it's too late for any changing or promises. I love you period. When you bore me or when, like today, and though kicking and dragging, you help make life a little more exciting."

"Before I die, yes?" The violet light deepened the wrinkles in his face, the tweed of his sportcoat.

He figured his question had been humorous but she nodded severely. "That's right. Loosen you and your wallet up before it's too late."

"Well I never thought I'd say it, but I had one hell of a good time! That one waiter was so snobby he didn't even want to take the whole tip!" he giggled. Wanted to save us from being branded *nouveau riches* or something I guess. He pondered the red light they had stopped at.

The limo ticked away, young people in shorts crossing in one chaotic wave. "But that's what I am all right," he continued.

"Hey! Old rich, new rich, or poor. He got his tip. That was his only business with you. Take things a moment at a time."

"Square basketball!" he laughed softly. "I could never come up with anything like that...too batty and too imaginative."

It was still somewhat light over the bay when they returned. They sat separately as they often did, this time to watch a windsurfer outlined in weakest fire against the dark.

He disappeared for a few seconds out in the chill vastness of water. Then his sail emerged much further out, looking almost like an inverted teaspoon, its bowl holding all of the remaining light.

After a last glimmer, that, too, folded into blackness, and they could not hear the other's breathing in the small apartment, or, later, the weeping.

Leftys

Rhonda Crabshaw ranked as the last to confide in, and in the blue fluorescence shot off by the Pepsi machine, she looked even more threatening. That brow! thought Larkie, it's like a balcony. But he had to seize the moment, even to admitting his shyness "...so I just wanted to ask your advice, see, because, well the women are forever teasing me, and with all the overtime lately, the only ones I meet are on the force, but I'm reluctant to ask any of them out in case they really do think I'm some kind of nerd."

Officer Crabshaw picked up a clipboard and seemed to be reading the solution to Larkie's dilemma off it, her forehead even more massive under the boyish haircut. "If they think you're a nerd, then it's their problem. Anyway, just don't bother with them--not enough time. You're twenty six or so, right, Larkie? Wasted too much of your life being nice. Somehow got to start accelerating. AccelerATING!" she drummed the clipboard with a pencil, and then abruptly ceased, shrugging "I'll...give you the course. But no tell!" drawing a rough finger over his lips, she laughed alarmingly. "On second thought, go ahead and tell if you want! I don't know what reputation I've got left and I simply don't care. What am I here for? To be a police officer, right? One of Miami's Finest! My personal life is personal."

"Well I wouldn't ever," Larkie started reassuring her but leaked steam rapidly. "Uh, if...you decided to...uh, ultimately..." Then he became convinced that Rhonda was aping the familiar, distressing pattern: "Uh huh! You're...kidding me too, Rhonda, am I right?"

"Nope. Never! Uh uh. No-oh-way. Nein. Nada. And negative in whatever language I'll have to take to qualify for my Master's in Criminal Justice--if I got that last word right. I don't kid; you'll find that out." Her gray eyes held twin, somber Larkies.

"But I thought you were...locked up with some dentist."

"And safe therefore? Shut up for now, Larkie!" She began smashing at the Pepsi machine with an open palm. "I thought before this that you were even too shy to talk, and now you're suddenly Officer Gabby. Anyway, that dentist knows gum disease but not how a woman feels." She rocked the machine, repeating the sentiment. "Tell me to stop, Larkie!" she finally breathed, hoarsely. "It's only a stupid device...and not a dentist. For one, it's better looking. And I've only lost half a dollar and not a significant portion of my only life." She bounced back from the rocking machine with a smile of vengeful glee. "Oooooops! Well I guess I'm on the rebound, hey? Do you know what that means?"

"Uh. No."

"It means, my bashful one, that I'll be twice as good to you and twice as *intense*." In the icy emanations from all the snack machines her eyes took on the color of mercury. "Well! Judgingby your look you got more than you bargained for. Wanted sisterly advice and ended up with a real woman instead! Your lucky day!"

...

Me and the poor dentist, sssssscarred bodies by the wayside! *I gave her my heart but she wanted my soul*, he mouths the words of a countrywestern song. Actually my body! I think that's what this is called, what's left of it. Larkie, in departmental trousers with powder blue Cuban shirt, sits on a bench at Dinner Key, halfwatching the sailboats tie up.

A phone rings in the marina office, recalling the one message on the machine blinking among scattered, unpacked boxes in his Coconut Grove apartment: "Come on back. There are things I can change. I've thought extensively about all of this."

An old boat groans into its berth. "*Everything aches*," Larkie whispers, "*body and soul hangover*." Out on Biscayne Bay, a sail dazzles against humpbacked clouds which are dark and yet brilliantly outlined. The sail, too, goes black though its edge remains sunlit. Larkie senses fire scouring his very bones.

Knees stuck straight out, a blond young man careens past him on a toosmall bicycle. Suddenly he slips off backwards, lifting it above his head, wheels spinning. It's a folding model, and a quizzical attempt ensues to break it down to carrying sizewhich act Larkie must tune out, a pitch for

attention from this apparent incompetent in droopy white shorts. After a few minutes, the sound of the bike being thrown into a shrub nearly coincides with the young man thrusting himself backwards onto the bench, enormously sighing. "Keep it simple, right?"

"If you can," Larkie shrugs.

"I can. Believe me."

"Then you're lucky I suppose."

"Hope so. Say! You're in blue and I'm completely blue, and so why not be that way together?"

"I wouldn't even know where to start with that kind of deranged thinking!" sneers Larkie. "In the first place, I do believe I come from another sexual direction."

"Don't even try to start. With my deranged thinking, I mean. Don't you even try! In the meantime, while you're not trying, I'll just sit here like a little lamb-y-kin--very short and very funny." The blond young man turns his knees and elbows inward, so as to diminish his size. "And if I feel any more lost, why then I'll ask you for sexual directions."

"You will huh? Did you get your highschool's award for *chutzpa*?"

"Just...*shyly*...wait. Uh, at your discretion."

"It's a free bench unfortunately." Larkie shuts his eyes against the intruder.

"I'm WAITing!" the young man eventually sings.

"Still here?" asks Larkie. "Then *I'm* to do something, huh? Is that it? Well, not bloody likely! I just came off an episode where I did things. Boy did I! May be better off not to even *think* for awhile." "I know what you mean, and I have no trouble at all in *that* pursuit--or lack of pursuit. So...here we sit, and when you sit, you can't chase anyone, can you? Or any idea either. I'm not moving. How about you? outside of your shaking on account of those *nasty* ole memories I mean." He wiggles closer to Larkie, smiling broadly, as if primed to explode into teasing laughter.

"Don't you mean it's *my* move? I get that strong implication. Perhaps it was the sly wink the cheapest trick in this silly seduction game you're absolutely wasting on me. And don't crowd!" Larkie inches away.

"It is and it isn't your move. And, golly gee, if I winked I didn't even know it maybe it's just squinting from that damn sun coming out! I like cloudy days more mysterious. Easier on the wrinkles too. And, say, you yourself are not above a little teasing either, are you? In your, of course, capital B, butch heterosexuality?"

"*It is and it isn't*," Larkie repeats his benchmate's words.

"Like everything else, I'd say. And butch, huh? I sometimes wonder if I was Butch or Bambi in my last...demolition derby, but why on earth am I telling...?"

"Because I'm open and warm. Mhhhh!" the young man briefly embraces himself with enough force to rock the bench.

"Hadn't noticed. *Agressive* is more to the point, I think."

"Excuse me for saying so, but you think too much."

"I do excuse you because you're right."

"Oh I wouldn't want to make that a habit! Although a little wouldn't hurt in my case. My wrongness index is way way up there. Typical fate of the dumb blond with, *ah hem*, innocent blue eyes."

"I'll buy the blue part," snaps Larkie.

"HMMMMM? I'm not sure that'll be enough. See me wondering? I'm WONDERing!" again he breaks into song.

"Oh? Still in need of guidance?"

"You could say that. Or direction."

"Good! Then how about you go *that* way?" Larkie points brusquely towards the Chart House Restaurant. "And pick up some lonely businessman on Master Card. You get a lobster and give your all, and I get to stay here and continue sulking without interference, or songs and dances with and without bicycles. Listen! If it were another time and place and dimension and we were two different people of the opposite sex...?"

"Nope. Can't just split like that. For one thing, I've probably been sent to be a whatchacallit, medium, to relieve all your tedious anxieties, and for another, we've known each other too long, wouldn't you say?"

"No! What else can I say?"

"Anything you please."

"Then let me say that I...gave her my heart and she... ate the fuckin thing! Then started on my soul for dessert."

"Past tense!" He smilingly claps his hands as if to dismiss Larkie's gloom. "Past tense!"

"Again, yes and no." "Feeling ambivilant then?"

"Not in your sense I'm not. Sorry."

"Don't worry. I don't want anyone's soul. My own's enough of a mess. Good gosh if I could see it I'd drop dead!" The blond young man sinks his head to his chest and pretends to die, twitchingly.

"Who wouldn't? And snap up! Don't want anyone to think I'm sitting here with a cokehead or someone. It's bad enough. But...why...am I *enjoying* myself with the likes of you? at least somewhat. And telling you things too? It's crazy. I never tell anybody anything! at least I won't ever again, not after confiding in...someone, and barely living to tell the tale.

God just listen to me whine!" Larkie slaps his forehead.

"So whine a little! Who are you not to? Which of these yachts is yours by the bye?"

"No such luck as I know you know always deflecting the real, aren't you? Anyway, I guess I'm just going crazy. I can only hope that I'm imagining *you*! Especially that...eye shadow or whatever it is. Just how weird are you, exactly? not that it's any of my business."

"I am an all natural product! You can take me anywhere. And I'm sincere!"

"You fake it well, saying what you think I want to hear: your strong suit I'd guess."

"If you cut me will I not bleed? And did you know a snake has two penises?" "Oh? How does he throw out a line in Coconut Grove?" muses Larkie. "Excuse me Bridget, excuse me Bo."

"Oh there are all kinds of ways! And I know the places where you see them all, believe me!" The young man nods quickly, continues nodding in a slower and slower rhythm, his bright hair rising and falling, then he stonily stops.

"Don't you think you give things a tad too much drama? if that's what that is. But, I'm...maybe one tenth of one percent *intrigued* about hearing of these alleged places where one sees everything at least I think that's what this is."

"Don't worry. Just an emotion, I have them all the time you can't always name them."

"I bet you do have them all the time, to the exclusion of everything else." Larkie shakes his head while his benchmate shrugs.

"What else is there? Don't answer. You know, you amuse me more than friends I've had for years? Mr ManAllInBlue whose answers are conventional but whose heart's a bit wilder, I'm guessing." He dons his most burnished looking smile as cloud shadows race over them.

"Well I'm glad to be good for something," Larkie chuckles, "such a wild heart in a square world is me! Give me a *break*, you...you subliterate fraud!" The quick breeze rills their hair, swirling candy wrappers, rocking the sailboats in their berths.

"It's called Leftys, the place I'd like to show you? *No apostrophe*! ever hear the radio ad? On South Beach." Gee it's a lovely wind now, isn't it? Just...lifting everything, hey?"

"Nothing. *Nada*." Larkie shakes his head.

"Well, that's a start. What's apostrophe?"

"God but you're a perservering...faggot!"

"Oh please! I hate that word *perservering*. Oooops, watch

it! Caught you *really* laughing. He's LAUGHing!" repeatedly sings the young man, ranging from bass to soprano. Hopping off the bench, he's soon down to one knee, golden in a shaft of sunlight.

*O De sun shine East
De sun shine West
O my dat sun
He a terrible pest!*

"Not as bad as you! And Al Jolson is long long *dead*," giggles Larkie.

*We ALLLLLLL'S gonna be!
Dead you see!
And that there's gotta be
My only guarantee!*

"*You'd* try to manipulate God himself!" Larkie bursts. The young man rises to hitch up his shorts and studiously brush his knees. "As long as we all understand each other."

The Bebop

They were all whores anyway and the younger ones just starting. Thus Randy Midden didn't feel all that bad to be without a clinging female in the vast, snow-filled parking lot of the shopping center, crunching towards the one-week old blue Dodge Aries he had parked far out from harm's way, just inside a circle of weak yellow-white light. "It's a curious--of the light. Osity. Cure-osity. Curiosity," he explained to no one in regards to the narrowness of the car he approached head on, experiencing a wave of despair as he imagined trying to explain such a phenomenon to the girls he left behind him at the Bebop Cafe. "Bends rays, something... forget it." But even in his distrust of women's general intelligence, Randy tried another illustration: "See? Looks like color of puddles, car does, like puddle stood up."

It seemed at that freezing moment the most hilarious image ever created and Randy hugged himself and giggled, puffs of dark vapor surrounding his scarlet face.

The pickup with the huge knobby wheels and enormous mirror-finish bumper was gone from atop the snowbank beside his space. It would have been pointed up past the moon, so bright and high now, but too low for the young man trying to pose next to that truck earlier, his leather jacket ballooning and his white scarf

whipping as his boots slid sideways--moon rising behind his tremulous underbelly. Idiot, recalls Randy, as a snowy wind slams into him. "Idiot!" Randy Midden had pronounced earlier as his hand reached for the cold brass handle of the door to the Bebop Cafe. Despite his efforts to remain stock still, Pepper Stutzman, the now twice-remembered idiot, had slid entirely down the snowbank and into the blue Aries as Randy Midden was strolling to the Bebop. Pepper Stutzman spat on the car then, and pronounced "Wimp Bucket!" And, having nothing else to do, he followed the wimp who owned it into the Bebop Cafe where he met Traction, another member of the Four-Wheelers. "Stutz-my-man, this place sucks," Traction told him. Traction sported a glass eye from a hot-rodding accident and Pepper always stared at that eye as if not to do so was rejecting a challenge.

Traction nodded towards Randy Midden who was already talking down to two blonde sisters seated on the floor amid rocking dancers. "Talker," sniffed Pepper Stutzman. "You gotta be talker. Like that asshole.

"We don't like talkers," affirmed Traction.

"We don't deal with no lines of shit," Pepper Stutzman informed him over the throttling bass of the huge speaker they sunk next to on the apron of the empty stage, "'cause what we say we do, and what we want we take."

"Amen, Stutz-Bear." Traction pointed to the S T U D stencilled on his own t-shirt.

For the next two hours the young men sipped Old Milwaukee from resonating styrofoam cups, and watched the verbal and dancetechniques of Randy Midden. Finally Traction suggested "Let's take him out and fuck him up the ass," his good eye blinking violently.

"Not classy enough," came the light, shy, laugh from Pepper Stutzman as a record changed with a clunk.

"Then what? Stutz-My-Man, our leader!"

"I'm, whatchacallit, thinking."

While incomprehensible punk spewed forth from the speaker next to them, Traction thought a moment about what Pepper had just said. Finally he blurted "I can't stand this fuckin place no more. I gotta move, Amigo." He stood up and a dancing couple avoided him drastically.

"Go fuckin home then, Traction."

"No-o-way!"

"That's an order. I'll call you and the others when I decided."

"I haven't got all fuckin night and besides, when I get there the ole lady'll whine about my never staying home."

"I gotta piss, man. Man where you piss?" a greenish youth in a pink tomahawk haircut inquired of Pepper Stutzman. Pepper threw his arm at the hundred dancers just before a wave of them engulfed the youth whose pink hair bobbed in their midst. "Anywhere, man. Like...anywhere," he shrugged.

"I aint fuckin kidding!" the youth told someone as Pepper turned back to sneer at Traction "We threw out a lot of shit about the regulations in our constitution to let married assholesjoin." Pepper's clear eyes drilled into Traction's glass one. "We can change that shit you know. Now give her a quick bang and stay by the phone."

"That an order too, Stuntman?"

"Engage. And give her one for the club." Engage meant put your vehicle in four-wheel drive, and therefore, get with it, or sometimes, in a milder tone: okay, right.

"I have to give her the gift, then. I'm loyal to the club."

"All there is that's worth it. And don't forget it! Brothers before bitches." Pepper punched him on a bare arm in a grazing way. "Now get your coat."

"I don't wear no coat. Hey! I'm a Four-Wheeler!"

Randy Midden was attempting to grope a fat, drunken girl in the forest of coat racks adjoining the wall holding the telephone when Pepper Stutzman finally made his call to Traction, who knew to call the others.

"Engage?" Pepper signed off.

"Engage engage!" Traction indicated that nothing could go wrong.

It didn't. Under Pepper Stutzman's direction the high knobby-tired pickups formed a circle with the blue automobile in the center; then after his scarf and Hitler salute shot through his glistening truck's open window along with the shrieking "Engage!" the trucks fishtailed in furious white smoke. A few seconds later, throwing snow straight back they ploughed into that Aries with the simultaneous precision of the club's *Wimpmobile Mash*. After impact they careened off in different directions, later to convene near the opposite end of the shopping center at SEAR'S AUTOMOTIVE EMPLOYEE PARKING, since Pepper knew of a Camaro with a bottle of Mad Dog under the front seat.

He toasted them all with blood trickling down his hand because he had to smash the window when Traction, t-shirt stiff with icy sweat, couldn't pick the frozen lock.

"Better get that hand looked at, Commander," the blue-armed Traction shook.

"Man it's fuckin nothing!" admonished Pepper Stutzman.

When Everything Is Funny

On the subway with a playful mind and should he ask?
Oh why not? It's innocent.

She goes ballistic, hair spiking, face a twisting
horrorshow. He couldn't have guessed she was insane; had picked
her, in fact, as the most normal one, her primness.

"*Sorry, but it's really no big deal!*" moving further away.
Rumor sweeps; he speeds.

-grabbed that woman by the tit
-hadda be worse than that, just look at her!
'tween her legs, said filthy, disgusting things!

What are you doing? What kind of pig are you?--
pummeller, black, intervening. I'm sick *to death* of us getting
blamed for this kind of shit all the time.

-to death
-to death
-to death
(with each blow)

Lilla DarraRhoden had just an hour ago flung her swarthy
male instructor all over the mat while shrieking empowerment
mottos...but then Costanza Wong had hissed

-Grab and twist my testicles with both hands!
-Huh, I knew it! Why YOU'RE even afraid to SAY testicles!
Might as well society keep giving YOU wall job. (Sneer.)

Here's the wall job for YOU! And I'M the wall, pervert,
she
does say now, karate chopping. The pummelling black and she
nod,
acknowledging no time for proper introductions.

*Please. There's some mistake. All I really said to her
was...*

Reggie the transvestite is prompted to join the dialog
(sold
Mary Kay Cosmetics):

Bash a gay and now you pay!

*But it was a lady and I didn't touch her and she
misunderstood or something. That's all. Stop! Please! All of
you. Terrible misunderstanding. Now listen! Please just
listen to me!*

bash a gay becomes gash a bay in latter services
also ball job
seth (sick to death)

Giddy within such linguistic faults, this three, but blows
never slacken.

Hey. Wait a little minute. Don't kill him.
...soft voice impossible to attribute gender to

WHY NOT? WHY NOT KILL HIM? WHY NOT KEEP HIM FROM
HUMILIATING OTHER WOMEN?

OR men even! this new person snaps, squeezing a fist
through the fury. But do let's hurry. I gotta get off next
stop. I'm a rabbi and taking grad work.

rimless spectacles--kind eyes, gray

Please. You. Man of God!

Hey! and don't I get sick of that old tune!

That lady was crazy. I said almost nothing!

Yeah! Right! (chorus)

Whereupon, they hammer in silence. (His coverup becoming
flaccid.)

mufflyness when clothing stuck
more melony, flesh

These sounds prove funny too. Echo. Overlap.

a good time
for citizens
best, solidarity, racial and sexual

like the many advertisements around them
on the subway, NYC

The Surprise

Man What the bleedin' hell!
Cyclist Oh I'm so sorry!

Man Minding our own business in a quiet cemetery and
 over the wall some IDIOT throws a bicycle! I don't
 believe it.

Woman That's what we were doing all right.

Cyclist Boys chasing me. Said they kill me! Said the rock
 concert was cancelled at the school, and for some
 reason I was going to pay for it.

Boy I can still see the light from that bike, faggot, if
 you think you're hiding or something!...well look at
 this scene! Like something from out of art class or
 something.

Man I hope you can run, wiseass.

Boy I know YOU can't, fatass!

Man GRRRRRRRR!

...

Cyclist Uh, cold?

Woman No.

Cyclist My jacket?

Woman It's okay

Cyclist Sorry. I mean...my intru...uh, crit critical moment.

Woman There are critical moments and there are critical
 moments. Cyclist He he won't run far, I mean, uh,
like he is

Woman Yeah he will. You don't know him.

Cyclist I'll stay here till he gets back

Woman No need.

Cyclist All kinds of weirdos around.

Woman No argument there.

Cyclist Are you sure...jacket?

Woman No. I like the way I look and feel. Breeze on me
 you know? You would too, if you looked at me.

Cyclist Excuse me?

Woman We were only having sex. No big deal. Ooops, I do
 hear him coming back. I suggest you get out of here.
 He can be crazy you heard him growl.

Cyclist If you think I should.

Woman Give me a call. Delky. I work at this church here.
 I know it's a funny way to meet, but I like biking
too.

The Secret Word

Driven by insults to play touch football with them, Buzz hoped Cecily would come to the field anyway. "You're too sweet on her! Be with the fellows sometimes! Why she's making you into a regular sweetieboy!" elbowed Josker Albright as they walked back to their side of the ball after a chaotic play, the other team jeering. The shirtless Buzz halted a moment to squint, his face green from the brilliance off the grass. He was trying to find her in the bleachers, and those jeers intensified now, with his name being hooted by players from both sides. Some began squealing *CeciLEEEEEEE!* When Josker flipped the ball to him after another botched play, he added, winking, "Give her something to think about, Buzz, old man!"

The *something to think about* proved to be the uncoordinated Roger Reddington de Graf, who stopped by 16 Songbird Lane with orange mums, jerking alongside them in blinding light as the slim Cecily flung open the white doors.

Buzz had to start Lehigh University that next week; Roger stayed in Stroudsburg to help his father sell Fords. Unknown to Buzz, he devoted the rest of his time to Cecily.

Unknown to Cecily, Buzz threw himself at beer drinking and those girls of Bethlehem who shared that activity often cleaning him up afterwards. On the verge of flunking out two months into the semester, he began sending a series of cards to Cecily, usually showing couples in fog, either among ancient forests, or on beaches crowded with driftwood. The verses of these cards his roommate, nicknamed Drunk, labeled *muzz-fuzzhaiku-y-looie*.

*moon on the pond
and then.....
a stone.....
and many moons*

*my footprints
yours.....
two paths.....
one,
to.....eternity.....*

*a heartbeat
a shudder
a silence
of flowers*

Buzz chose not just these artistic expressions, but others of more pedestrian strain.

*Thinking of You...
Just a note to say
You're one who's not forgot.
Sorry there's been some delay
'cause I care for you a lot!*

*I know I'm not clever.
That much I have to say.
But a true friend is forever,
For this and every day!*

Towards the end of first semester, after a brutally dry period of hitting the books, Buzz catapulted back to the local girls. He had spent Thanksgiving break at Drunk's parents' house in Scranton, and for Christmas vacation had joined his own parents at an aunt's retirement village near St Augustine zero chances to see Cecily.

No more cards were dispatched until Valentine's Day, when for some reason he sent a comic one in the shape of a gold key.

*Hey why not open that trunk?
AND LET MY HEART OUT!!!!!!!!!!!!!!*

A little like a shellshock victim clamping onto an obscure faith, and after he and three town girls an intense week each had gone through each other, Buzz finally got around to writing Cecily his one heartfelt, if circuitous, note: somehow begging that she reform him while he, presumably, awakened her sexually. It had been immediately, too, after religion had swept in, prompted by a revival meeting in Bethlehem which Dean of Men Brendenhof had strongly recommended to him. Buzz had been saved and afterwards met over hot cider and cinnamon donuts the one local girl, Gladys Alderfelder, who knew she could tame him.

"I told my mother about you," she informed Buzz a few days later, "and she says you're oversexed and should see a doctor, that young men can ruin themselves and never have a good career."

You'll never be a good engineer, Buzz, 'cause that's all you think about."

That one sincere note to Cecily had arrived after her elopement with Roger Reddington de Graf, and she sent it back with all the cards and a tissuey note saying *Dear Dear Buzz, thereasons one marries can't just be that one and that one alone.* She had written from her new home on the lake, full of the antiques Roger's mother had given the couple.

After college, Buzz worked as a designer and model maker for The Foothills Toy Company, owned, strangely enough, by the Pocono Mountain area's most flagrant Socialist, Bret Hansen, who became very fond of the apolitical Buzz.

He retained the bundle of cards Cecily had sent back and eventually rubberbanded it when the lavender ribbons disintegrated. His upfront wife, Evy, whom he had met at a toy industry convention in Harrisburg, had already proclaimed, and more than once, "Your past aint my business and vice versaif you're one of them gets jealous notions." Buzz kept the cards and Cecily's note in a locked desk drawer, and actually did get upset thinking of what Evy may have been hiding, making a fruitless search one night when she was at her canasta group.

After ten years or so, Roger Reddington De Graf and Cecily bought a onethird interest in the toy company, on the very day Buzz was hospitalized with a hernia after lifting the clay model of Monstro-Robot.

Cecily and Roger, upon reading of his hospital stay in THE POCONO MESSENGER, sent him a card of a cartoon man, very bony, swathed in bandages and on crutches, surrounded by broken machinery and scrawny dogs.

*I might be
too old to cut the mustard seein'
all this rout,
but I'm still full of beans and sauerkraut!*

He visualized her at sixteen by the moonlit lake, and repeated quietly from his hospital bed, "How many moons? O how many moons?"

Nurse Lucille Nitti overheard. "Yeah and lots of water under the dam too, huh, Honey? You do b.m. yet, Honey?"

"I will inform you," he pronounce firmly.

"I like the sound of that, Honey!" she fluffed the pillow around his rigid head.

The years, and the moons, flew and the couples had each a late child, Gwen for Buzz and Evy, and Roger Jr. for Roger and Cecily. Both Dads were thirtythree. The children went to different schools and ultimately attended the University of

Pennsylvania, but never met, either there or in Stroudsburg.

On Buzz's fiftieth birthday old man Hansen suffered a fatal heart attack, and diehard Socialists from all over the country attended the funeral. He made provision in his will for Buzz which the New York lawyer had to explain several times: "You must immediately retire, and then you receive a generous monthly stipend for the rest of your life." As Buzz shook his gray head, the lawyer explained further that Hansen felt that his heirs and the other owners might, he quoted him, "*sell out to sharpies. And the first thing they do in the land of the brave is to raid the pension fund.*"

"That sure sounds like him," offered the shaking Buzz.

"Some West Germans did just that to A&P Store employees. We don't have enough thieves, we have to import them," the lawyer shrugged, a grim young man dressed Wall Street save for a bloodred cravat.

Had Buzz kept a diary the sole entry for the seventh year after retirement might have read: *Roger takes over company completely and milks it, sells most of the patents to the Japanese.* The one for the eighth year would read *My Evy dies shoveling snow.*

After Evy's death he sold the house and contents at auction and went to Florida to live in Coral Gables near his daughter, Gwen, who taught ballet at The University of Miami.

That very year they cut the dancing program, so she's off to Tulane with her Latin lover Carlos, who she claims has only been helping her with the electric in her Coconut Grove studio. (He did, in fact, show wiring plans to Buzz who told him "You don't have to draw me a diagram.")

After they leave, it proves cheaper living in Miami Beach but the angry faces of many of the other retired people irritate Buzz. Sweetness, the black counterboy at Wolfy's consoles "They're all New Yorkers and they grew up snapping at each other about business. Only now they got tans. And no business. Don't take it serious. People are the same under all the styles."

Roger dies, and THE POCONO MESSENGER featuring the front page obituary touting that civic leader also contains an article about senior citizens sharing houses.

Buzz finally moves back to Stroudsburg to a shared house owned by a Mrs Lahr, where he is greatly appreciated, being, among other thing, Friday's cook. One of the sharers, Miss

Meniffie proclaims "I always look forward to Friday!"

It's nice for her to say, but for some reason things begin slipping *anybody can do Sloppy Joes and Fritos* admits Buzz to

himself. *Maybe I'm getting too old to cut the mustard* which brings back the silly card Roger and Cecily had sent him so many years ago.

In the back of his mind he has thought of contacting Cecily after a decent interval. Such a time has long passed when he sends a birthday card on a whim.

He had walked to the mall and was out of breath reaching *The Little Card Shoppe*, a franchise operation in the throes of a nationwide promotion, and therefore full of metallic balloons which moved about in the air currents and kept bumping him.

"May I help you?" inquired a gumchewing young woman in very elevated, sharply clicking heels. Her badge read Merrie, asst mgr.

"Yeah, stop stocking all these gushy cards. And I'm coming in here with a pin next time!" She, amused, led him noisily through the balloons to a spin rack labeled TASTEFUL CONTEMPORARIES. He eventually chose a card featuring a black and white photo of a blind man with a cane who sported, though, huge orange sunglasses. *"Hey! Long time no see I gotta say..."* read the caption snaking from his mouth, and then inside the card, a platinum blond in a mink cape and nothing else kicked up her orange heels, a bottle dangling from one hand and a downturned champagne glass in the other.

but feel free

to have yourself one HELL of a birthday!

She was a kind of pink softsculpture of amazingly elastic flesh.

The day he mails the card one crocus breaks through ice on the tiny lawn of the post office. A week later a note comes back signed by Jacqueline Naismith, MSW.

We are honored to say that Cecily is a guest here at Bide a Bit now. She asked me to report that she'd sure love a visit!!!!!!!!!!

He goes to see her and is confronted by a muttering, prematurely old woman in a wheelchair in front of a bright window, wisps of pale hair brilliantly vibrating, her flesh pink and purple, hands spasmodic, jumpy. Before he can speak she warns of the Pennington boys as he is holding her icy hands down. They had been stealing, he gathers, riotously digging up bulbs too, and going wild on the garden swing. Actually he had walked by that big house on the lake earlier, only to see a comic wrought iron sign featuring two doctors over a mound-like patient and the legend THE GYNECOLOGISTS SPEISENGLASS.

Cecily stops talking and stares at Buzz for many moments, her eyes bluer, and younger, than he can remember. "Are you Roger?"

"Roger is, was you husband. I'm your old friend, Buzz." Fat Roger Jr enters and Buzz drops her hands. Roger wears a tootight blazer with a FORD logo, open, his shirt beginning to spillout the front like laundry from a truck.

"I'm Buzz." Buzz extends his hand.

"Isn't everybody?" counters Roger Jr who storms into a monolog about not being able to depend on his new service manager. "Now don't let her pull that forgetfulness crap on you either," he suddenly shouts from nowhere. "These guerilla fighters of the Alzheimers Brigade aren't above a little manipulation."

"She's been just fine," assures Buzz.

"Say, you worked for the toy company, didn't you? I saw you in some old photographs in the mess of my father's estate. That was one lulu of a communist used to own it, wasn't he? So you, especially, shouldn't be so rough on my Dad. He was fine until..." and Roger Jr nods in the direction of silently chewing Cecily. "Huh! She eating air again?"

"I never was rough on your Dad or easy on him or anything else," Buzz asserts. "I retired before..." and Roger Jr stares at him as if he's the one with Alzheimers. "Anyway, how's the business?" Buzz tries.

"Which one? Oh, toy company? We sold to Koreans last year and they moved it lock stock and barrel to Jamaica would you believe? They just make the one thing now, Destructo World you probably seen on TV--that flies apart when you say the secret word? Complete junk, I mean complete! And they can't make enough of them."

At that moment the sunlight amplifies frail Cecily and theyboth look at her. She drools but nonetheless quickens enough to pop: "Say the secret word and win ten dollars! It's something you hear every day."

Roger whispers "Now she's getting religious or something!" But Buzz tells him she had been alluding to a TV quiz show with Groucho Marx. "If you said the secret word a rubber duck dropped down with a Groucho moustache and cigar."

"Yeah, well that's all too intellectual for me. I like sports."

(And Buzz had thought all along that Groucho was mean until he softened with one contestant, a confused man, and was completely kind--*Oh well that's one on me* he remembers telling his wife. In fairness to her, Evy was in the depths of her PMS and she snapped "Grow up Buzz!")

But he remains hurt, even now in this sunny room of the convalescent hospital. In fantasy Groucho says "Buzz, I would never make fun of you."

"Our toys were creative," he tells Groucho...and the alarmingly real Roger Jr.

"Yeah well, spare me that part of any business. I mean, spare me! There's nothing but the bottom line. Forget that and you're ready for a place like this. These cunt doctors bought the house? They wanted a rakeoff 'cause they would *preserve* it and all that good shit! Yeah! Sure!"

Buzz staggers a bit, ashamed he had abstracted for so long, and gotten a bit dithery himself. Cecily emits a squeal as Roger Jr hammers on, his shirt entirely out of the front of his pants: "Bottom line's the bottom line the bottom line--didn't somebody say that? Well, it's about a rose or daisy or some such shit but it's the same thing."

Now Cecily tries talking but can't, her head nodding vigorously and her hands out of control. Some hairs vibrate on her shiny chin and her son blurts "We ought to have Gillette in here sponsoring *this* show!"

Finally she grates out *secret* and starts on *word*. When she says *love*, Phyllis Heller, blocky LPN, materializes to spin her chair around. "She talking dirty again? Are you, Miriam? Ooops. Not Miriam! Sorry about that! Miriam got a mouth like a longshoreman!"

But Roger Jr. waves his hand before she can spin Cecily back around to face them again. "It's okay," he tells her. "These Alzheimers pretty much all look the same. Like the Japanese cars my competition sells. Anyway, we're through. Stick her on the sundeck."

Back in his room, Buzz, shaking, examines the bundle of cards again. *The reasons we marry can't just be that one and that one alone* the faded brown ink still maintains. *Two paths* he reads from a card, *two paths*, and Buzz sees Cecily, in white, walking by the lake and murmuring over and over *The reasons we marry can't just be that one and that one alone*, and he grows sick with remembered moonlight and cries softly into the dusk seeping into his room through the halfopened door. "The secret word...is love" he whispers.

Mrs Lahr interrupts. "Hey! I'll agree to anything, but let there be light! I'm not that cheap that I won't treat you to a little light from time to time." She flicks on a switch and spots the bundle of cards in his hand: "Getting rid of the evidence, hey? Don't mind me. Nosy! I know you kept them all locked up, probably because they were so naughty!"

Buzz suddenly visualizes the inside of his small Sanyo cube refrigerator, sees frosting aglint in the dark. He pushes the cards aside and rises to fetch the Entemen's Ring Danish. In no time he is frisking to the coffee percolator also, dragging a

sleeve over his face to wipe a remaining tear or two, an action quietly noted by Mrs Lahr.

"Is this the new light kind?" she inquires about the pastry.

"No calories at all," winks Buzz, "not a one." His hand is trembling as he cuts, or rather hacks at it, with a butter knife. "I know you'd never lie to me," she laughs.

He sits in his Lazy Boy recliner and she on a desk chair by the window as they eat and drink, a dark magnolia tree looming in back of her squat profile.

After she places her plate and cup and saucer in his small sink he ventures, "Why go all the way back to your chair? Plenty of room here."

While bouncing Mrs Lahr on his knee, insofar as he can, a prelude to tugging her back further into the recliner, he will intone with a straight face, "I bet you've never done thisbefore."

And her eyes will assume a glee which contrasts to her usual rosy calm. "Never!" Pulling off fragments of his remaining Danish to feed him, almost singing: "Let's just do the best we can, Buzz. That's all we can do."